



"Why, I'm old enough
to be his—'"

On Moon Hill

By WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

Illustrations by William D. Stevens

THE woman stamped on the frozen ruts within the circle of the lantern's light and spoke to the collie a few yards ahead:

"Lady, where's Larry Boy? Tell Missis—where's Larry Boy?"

The mother dog pointed her frosty muzzle still higher in the air toward the summit of the north mowing, whined, and half rose from the "charge," quivering with the agony of restraint.

"Lady!" The collie sank back with a quivering sigh. "She must let Larry Boy learn." The woman stamped for another moment, then lifting the lantern, she cried away over the shimmering snow: "Larry—good dog—bring 'em to Missis! Good dog—" She broke off and bent her head to one side, listening. After perhaps a dozen seconds the majestic quiet of the hill world beyond was ruffled by a faint note, repeated thrice, the yelp of a collie pup not yet come to the full voice.

The woman clapped her hands softly, and cried to the mother:

"Good dog! He's started them, Lady. I knew he—" She left off between two words. "What—what's that?" She lowered her head once more. "Lady, what—who is it?" Lady's cold nose was in the woman's neck at the call of her name, but she said, "Quiet, Lady—"

She held the lantern behind her and strained her eyes over the vague expanse. Then she turned back toward the farm-buildings, an irregular blotch on the snow, broken by the bright squares of the kitchen windows. She called: "Ben! Oh, Ben!" through a cupped hand. But no answering rift appeared in the fan-light from the stable door, and the distant "York State" song, to which the hired man clung with such a discordant will in these alien hills of New Hampshire, droned on. The woman wheeled with a sudden nervous gesture up the mowing.

"Go, Lady," she cried—"go bring them to Missis! Bring the ponies to Missis!"

She need not have embroidered the command, for the collie was gone with the gesture, silent after the first soft yell of relief, flat to the snow, skimming the dim drift of the hill. The woman raised her head and shielded her ear from the east, where the notes of Gorham church's six o'clock came winding through the folded country. Then she whirled the lantern and hallooed:

"Good dogs—good dogs—bring 'em to Missis! That's right. Good dogs!"

They came streaming down upon her out of the lofty night. She tried to count them, shielding her eyes from the clods of a hundred tiny hoofs, as the shaggy fellows poured past her into the lane, each with a white-disked eye gleaming at the lantern she held aloft. Larry Boy, copper-colored and mighty, swung triumphantly in the rear, with his lean and perfect mother watching over him, ready to snap at the slightest error.

The woman slackened her pace when she was still some rods from the barnyard, and began to breathe more evenly. When she entered the pony-shed, Ben was stationed where the pens converged, slapping and cajoling the shaggy rioters into their appointed quarters. Just now, hidden to the waist by the ponies' backs, the hired man gave the impression of a rather homely and domesticated centaur, wearing a halo. He had hung the lantern on a nail above the bald spot on his head, and the ascending mist of his breath gave the shining disk an appearance of sublimity.

"Did ye have trouble?" he shouted through the tumult. "They must have been a sight of a way to-night, Miss Vail."

That implied apostrophe after the "Miss" was significant of the attitude the community bore toward this woman who had come out of nowhere to take the farm on Moon Hill. She was thirty, perhaps, without a husband or a memory of one, and yet the dullest wit among them could see that she was not an "old maid." Be-

fore the end of her first week, folks along the Bedlam Road had seen her riding out in trousers; even through the folds of a long, gray coat the acute perception of the isolated had sensed the fact of those trousers. And then there was the outlandish project of breeding Shetlands on Moon Hill, and plenty of other things, to be argued about at Gorham post-office. So it was really a profound tribute to this woman's personal qualities that they should already have begun to compromise unconsciously with their habits of mind by blurring the end of that "Miss" with the ghost of another syllable.

It was a moment before she answered the query in the farmer's tone.

"There was something wrong up—" She hesitated, and bent over abruptly to pat Larry, who panted at her knee. "I sent the little dog," she said. "He'll come along, though. They're all here, are they?"

Ben rested his head on his shoulder and surveyed the pens, wrinkling the corners of his eyes indulgently. Then he unwrinkled them with an explosive "By Harry!"

"What's the matter?" the woman cried.

"The babies—that last pair from Tennessee—they're not here, Miss Vail." He turned from the pens to face her. "What was it ye started to say was wrong up there? That is, if ye don't mind, ma'am."

"There was somebody in the mowing," she said—"somebody who does n't belong around here."

"What d'e look like?"

"I did n't see him. It was only somebody whistling."

"How d'ye know, then—" Ben clucked in his throat. "Beg pardon. I've no doubt ye know what ye're saying. H-m-m-m—well?" They stared into each other's faces. By and by Miss Vail began to laugh nervously.

"I'm sure we're making something out of nothing," she declared. "Probably they've just strayed to another bare spot. They'd keep together." The other shook his head slowly and muttered:

"Mebby so, mebby so. Lady would know if—"

The woman lifted a little on her toes.
"Why had n't we thought? Lady! Lady!" She went to the door and called: "Lady! Good dog! Why, she's run off, Ben! I wonder if she's gone—no—listen!" From away in the darkness of the lane came the conscience-stricken whisperings of a dog whose allegiance is divided. After that the sound of heavy crunching became audible. "Ben," the woman called, "come here."

They stood in the door, holding their lanterns high. Into the circle came first the mother dog, doubling and whining, and a moment later a figure labored out of the gloom, the smaller of the missing foals clasped to his heaving chest. He blinked at the waiting pair, his face, already bright with the cold, flushing a deeper color at Ben's inquisitory "Hullo?"

Without answering, he wheeled, and called back into the shadow: "Come along there, other one. Yes, little girl," he went on, pounding his burden gently with a palm, "other one 'll be here directly; don't you worry. Shep,"—he spoke to Lady,— "go bring in the other one! Go on!" He entered the shed, muttering all the time, and laid the foal very carefully where the evening hay was thickest. "Yes, she did have a bad one," he rambled on, as though desperately afraid of another pause. He straightened a foreleg gently. "Yes, yes, she did get cast in the dogwood; yes, and all laid open pretty near to the bone. Now if only somebody was to have a bit of axle-grease. And she's gone and caught the snuffles. If only somebody was to have a bit of aconite—"

Of the others, Ben was the first to open his lips, and then it was something of professional pique which prompted him.

"It's all right, young fellow." He touched the stranger on the shoulder. "Much obliged for bringing her in. I can fix that scratch all right. I've got something better 'n axle-grease."

The ministrant sprang up and retreated into a corner, flushing, and blowing against the ends of his stiff fingers. Miss Vail

followed, and held out her hand with an impulsive gesture of friendliness.

"We *are* obliged. I don't know what we should have done."

"It's all right," he mumbled, scowling with embarrassment.

"Come," she said. "You look as chilled as the ponies. Ben will take care of *them*. You come into the house and have some coffee—" She regarded him during an imperceptible pause. In that pause she took account of the stiff hat with the frayed ribbon, the week-old collar, gaping over the purple tie, the bargain-counter "ready-made" which had suffered from rain. "And something to eat," she added.

"Aw, I'm all right," he muttered, putting his hands into his pockets and taking them out again. "I was just passing. I'll go along now."

"Where?" She had seen enough to justify the direct question.

"Aw, over the hill." He blew desperately against his fingers.

"Come!" she said.

She tried to trick him into words as they faced each other across the table in the library she had evolved from the ancient Perkins's bedrooms. But before long she discovered that his embarrassment was preventing him from eating, and murmuring an excuse, she got up and started toward the kitchen, where Ben's wife wailed another "York State" song. In the connecting passage it was dark. She stopped there and turned to study this uncatalogued wanderer of a winter's night.

This was not a man; this was a boy. She could examine now with more understanding the high, freckled cheeks, the hanging lips, the strong jaw that was somehow not sure of itself. She had not accomplished what she had intended, however, by leaving him alone. He seemed to have forgotten his food, and his eyes were roving over the furnishings of the room with a light of intense curiosity and wonder. Reaching behind her, Miss Vail opened and closed the door to carry out her fraud, and then walked briskly back into the library.

"Don't you think we did well with this room?" she asked him, smiling and fussing with her napkin.

"Yes, ma'am." But his eyes were on his plate again. For the moment, Miss Vail laid aside perhaps five generations of ancestors.

"You did n't expect to find it so nice in a house like this," she challenged. For some unaccountable reason he was frightened at that. He jerked suspicious eyes at her, and she saw his chin twitch.

"Ugh-ugh!" He shook his head, and churned the potato with his fork.

She bit her lip gently and, moving to the piano, began to play quite without direction, fingering a phrase from this and from that so idly that one might almost have suspected an intention about it. Once she looked around, smiling, and found the boy's elbows propped on the table, his eyes watching her from between his fingers.

"That is better," she told herself. Her fingers wandered over the keys, chose, discarded, picked up a thread of that utterly sad adagio from the "Sonata Pathetic," and followed it surely. She heard the other get up, but he did not move nearer, as she had expected; instead he went away to the long window which gave down the valley and stood there silhouetted against the blue of the early moon on the snow. Her fingers halted abruptly. She went back and played the last phrase again. Still she did not seem satisfied. Dropping her left hand, she began to pick out the dominant air of the measure note by note. She swung around suddenly to face her quiet visitor.

"You like Beethoven, don't you?"

"Who?"

"Beethoven. You know, he wrote this." She indicated the phrase once more. "You were whistling it to-night up in the mowing."

"Oh, that!" He came forward into the light, and she could see how much better he felt about himself already. "That—I heard a fellow whistling that once on the Bowery. I liked it."

"You play, don't you? Please."

"No, I'm not good enough." But she had risen quickly and gone to sit by the fire, leaving him standing by the empty stool. He began, as she had, in a desultory fashion. After a while she realized that he was playing the identical snatches she had touched in her wanderings—playing them very inaccurately, but apparently untroubled by his blunders.

She found herself wondering why she was not suffering. She tried to analyze her emotion, and found the whole affair a perfect enigma, until the solution confronted her with its simplicity. This boy was not playing anything she had ever heard before. Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner the Great—they had had nothing to do with the sequences of notes and pauses this stranger's fingers lifted out of the instrument.

And the thing was done with such a subtlety, with such an incredible caution, making shrewd capital of every discord, calculating accidents to the uttermost fraction of a beat, and never for an instant giving itself away. She was aware of a shadow of syncopation, but for the sharpest watching she could not lay a finger on his tampering. There was something indescribably barbaric about it, and sumptuous, and at the same time utterly sophisticated, as though it smiled behind its hand.

Miss Vail leaned forward and stirred the embers in the fireplace. Her face showed red in their glow, even redder, perhaps, than they could account for. She was not accustomed to being treated in just this way. When she spoke, the five generations had come back.

"You are really quite extraordinary, are n't you?"

At the sound of her voice the other dropped his hands, whirled around slowly, and confronted her with an unexpected fire.

"You're making fun of me." In that half-dozen words, charged with a sort of desperate rancor, he might have been telling the history of his life. "I know I make mistakes. I wanted to remember the things you played because I never heard

them before, and they made me feel like keeping them, and then you—" He gulped. "Oh!" He stared at his fingers. "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

Just for an instant Miss Vail stood looking down at him. Then she said:

"I beg *your* pardon. And if you will let me say it again, you *are* really quite extraordinary, are n't you?" It was characteristic of this woman that she could convey confession, regret, and amazement by the simple accentuation of two monosyllables.

"I have n't asked you your name," she said, after a moment. "My name is Vail—Marion Vail." She waited for him to speak.

"Mine's Ed." He got up and began to move about the room, making a show of peering into the corners. "I forget where I laid my hat."

"What about your hat?" She spoke almost sharply, as though she had no time for preposterous ideas. "Of course you're to stay here to-night. There's plenty of room. My farmer and his wife have their own place in the L."

He was standing again by the paneled windows, and for a moment did not answer. When he turned, she saw that his face was red with embarrassment.

"I guess you don't know how folks here talk," he floundered. "That is, folks in a place like this. I—I don't think—"

Miss Vail's expression did not change by a shade. In truth she had failed to notice what he was saying, just as she would have failed to notice any other indelicacy committed in company.

"If you'll just excuse me a moment," she said, "I'll run up and see that everything is straight." She took a candle from the piano, lit it, and went away up-stairs. She was gone perhaps four minutes. When she came down again her visitor was no longer there.

It was nine o'clock of the following morning when Miss Vail sat in the library at her solitary breakfast. The mercury had begun to go up sometime before the dawn, ushering in a clear, soft day, full of rumors and underground stirrings and

the voice of minute waters, twigs snapping, and all the farm creatures screeching unreasonably. Already the hills had begun to show their ribs through the tattered garment of winter, and here and there a precise pepper-and-salt patch published the presence of a stubble-field. Even moderate Ben, when he came to stand in the doorway, hat in hand, for the morning conference, exhibited a red bud in a buttonhole.

"He went out with the ponies," he announced without preliminary. "Seemed to want to. My woman give him some breakfast."

"Wha'—wha'—" Miss Vail turned her attention to the slice of toast between her fingers. She broke it in half and proceeded very deliberately to butter one of the fractions. "You mean the young man who was here last night?" she said when she had finished.

"Yes, ma'am. I came near settin' the hay-barn afire this mornin'. Ye see, I did n't know he was there, and when I see the fodder bulgin' up in the dark, I come near droppin' the lantern, I tell you."

"I see." Miss Vail picked up the other half of the toast. Ben tipped his head a little nearer his shoulder, and squinted at the ceiling with a kind of apologetic shrewdness. "Sort of a queer party—that—"

"I think you might haul that grain this morning, Ben." Miss Vail folded her napkin carefully and pushed back her chair. "And if you would put the saddle on Valentine before you go."

She found the boy where she had expected she would, beyond the crest of the mowing. The ground had been bare there nearly a week. He sat stretched out, with his back against the solitary elm-tree, his hands clasped behind his head, whistling quietly to himself. He did not see her coming till the dogs were upon him with their friendly tongues; then he scrambled to his feet, fingering awkwardly at the brim of his hat.

"Please sit down," she called to him, dismounting. She came nearer, waving a

hand at the hills and the sky. "Is n't it wonderful?"

"Yes, ma'am." He bent down and searched for pebbles. "Makes me think of the clothing trade," he went on, tossing the pebbles from palm to palm. "February—and already they're getting out an advance model of the correct thing for spring. I—you see, I know about models and things because I teamed for a clothing house once—for a month."

"You were n't brought up in the city, were you?"

The boy looked up quickly, a shadow of that desperate rancor of the night before in his eyes. His fingers strayed in self-conscious distress to the gaping collar. "I know," he muttered. "Even the kids playing in the street down the East Side—even they knew enough to call me a greenhorn. I don't know—I never could seem to—" But there the woman broke in with a passionate rush.

"Oh, you ought to know better—you ought to understand me better than that! I was n't thinking about clothes; I was thinking about you. Do you know,—" she paused and waved both hands over the leaping country,—"a real city-bred could n't stand a day like this. He would n't know what was the matter. He'd sit down and jump up and light a cigar and throw it away and wipe his glasses and wonder if he had n't better see a doctor. In the end of course he'd run back to the subway and find his peace. But you,—" she made a loop in the air with her finger to indicate the boy's posture of perfect relaxation,—"it's not brandy to you. It's only a—well, a country wine."

"I don't want any other kind." He spread out his palms toward the warm sun. "I feel like I could lie here forever—just lie here and watch the ponies and the hills and the sky and—and rest. Not even think—or hear the street cars or people hollering at me, or feel 'em shoving me or see 'em grinning at my clothes—" He broke off suddenly, awed by the lengths to which he had gone in company. He darted a furtive glance at his companion, and found that she was not looking at him at

all, but dreaming over the ponies. It took him an appreciable instant to realize that here was a person expressing sympathy and interest, and yet with no desire to intrude upon him, to meddle, tamper, distort.

"I know I'm beat," he went on with an amazing serenity. "I guess I was n't cut out for much of anything, and now to-day I don't care. I know what folks hereabouts are saying." He hesitated and then added: "Yes, I do come from here, Miss Vail. I was born in that house—your house. I did n't know the folks had sold the place till Lem Waters told me last night, and then I was almost here—and I thought I'd like to take a look at the mowing, anyway."

"Yes."

"Oh, it ain't anything," he muttered. Then, as though fearful of a diversion, he rushed on: "I ran away from here, like any farm-boy might do. There was a shoe drummer in Gorham once told me a fellow who could play by ear like I could get a job quick in New York. That's why I ran away. Well, I guess he was stretching it a trifle. I only got one chance like that after hunting around for five months,—playing a broken-down square piano in the back room of a saloon on Grand Street,—and even then I could n't keep it more than a week, and the boss liked my playing, too. Another fellow needed the job more than I did; at least he told me he did one night when I came out. I had n't anybody but myself to worry about, and this fellow had a mother and three smaller brothers and sisters to look out for, and there he was, out of a job—and he could play pretty good, too. What could a fellow do? I never went back to the place for a week. By that time I was out of money, and I thought I might get a little loan from that fellow. You should have heard everybody laugh when I came in. You see, he'd just been lying to me. He did n't have a soul to look after no more than me. And then—oh, it was always that way—somebody trying to play a trick on you—crowds of people, strangers, ready to take what they

can get out of you, shoving, eating you up—”

“Yes, yes!” Miss Vail lifted a quick hand in protest, as though he had somehow hurt her. “Don’t I know what it is?” And then she repeated what he had said, as if to herself, staring away over the ponies.

The boy looked at her, wondering.

“Is that—is that why *you* came here, too?” Seeing that she made no sign in answer, he laid his head back against the tree, and stretched his legs another inch over the warm earth. “I like the little horses,” he mused. “I used to think I knew something about the big ones, and I suppose there ain’t a great deal of difference between the sizes. My! my! The times I’ve laid on a bench in Washington Square and seen this same mowing and this tree and the hole in the wall where you go over to the orchard. I killed seven woodchucks out of that hole, different summers, and they kept coming back. Must have been an awful’ good wood-chuck house, don’t you think? I don’t suppose there’s a great deal of work here now—that’s not attended to, that is. My! my!”

The woman smiled at his indirection.

“Yes,” she said, “we can always find work here if we look for it. I’ve been thinking we ought to raise more of our own grain, and two of the south fields were fallow last year. Yes, Ed, there’s work *here*, anyhow, and nobody to eat you up or crowd or jostle. I think you would do well with the ‘little horses.’ ”

They walked back over the rise, the mare Valentine at the trail. At the crest they paused to look down the quivering valleys. The bland exhalations of the earth rose and filled them, so that they lay like winding estuaries, their slow, vaporous tides washing the margins of the hills. A mile to the south the ghost of a blue flower hung in the lofty air, and Ed pointed it out with a little break of excitement in his voice. “Granny Hope is baking to-day.”

He put his hands in his pocket and stared at the pale smoke-flower.

“Now, why in the world did I say that?” he wondered. “Granny Hope’s been dead nine years. It’s funny I said that, isn’t it?” After a moment he went on: “You know, Granny Hope was a sort of witch. That is, she could tell things that were going to happen, really,—a lot of things,—and they happened afterward. Once she told me I’d be a band-master when I grew up. There was a picture of Philip Sousa in a newspaper once, and I cut it out and pinned it over my bed. It’s something to laugh at now. But do you know, Miss Vail, I honestly thought, when I got on the train down at Gorham, that I was going to make something big of—of—”

The woman, who had been stroking the mare’s neck, looked up quickly to see why he had broken off. She found him standing with his palms held out to the sunlight, as though he took a poignant pleasure in handling it. He had thrown his memories over without a gasp, under the insidious ravishment of this “country wine” of his. She raised a hand with a motion almost passionate in its protest. Then she bit her lips, and her cheeks colored.

They went on down the slope, and the farm roofs came up to meet them, shimmering, ringed about with a more persistent clamor at every step—geese screaming, cattle bellowing like wind in haunted houses, the ram Martial making his absurd challenge to this unseasonable spring. They could see Ben sowing grain to the chickens, and even in that sober person’s gestures there was something wild and exuberant, as though through intimate association with the hens he had taken to flapping.

They halted again on the last buttress of the hill, and the young man waved his hands over the world below.

“My!” With that monosyllable it seemed that he passed a sponge over something distressful, obliterating memory. “Just look at it, Miss Vail. I feel like a kid again.”

But she did not look at it. She broke out with a singular vehemence:

“Why, you can’t stay here.”

He faced about, startled out of his vagary. She confronted him with an expression of desperate defiance, as though he might have tasked her for this breach of a hereditary faith, for this wanton squandering in a moment of the family fortunes of reserve, hoarded through generations.

"Can't I?" he said, his chin twitching slightly.

"No! no! Not this way. Can't you see?" She shook her head, and then, as though throwing everything to the wind, she hurried on: "I can't see you come back beaten like this, Ed. To-day you feel like heaven. It will wear off. All your life you 'll itch with it. You 'll go through life a beaten man. I can't bear to think of it. I can't think of you growing old under the shadow of that. I can't!" She stopped with a sort of gasp, as though she had come to the end of her breath without warning. "Oh," she stammered, "I 'm afraid I 've—" And then the sight of him standing there so bewildered put back for another moment that rebellious habit of sight which had made her see the yokel.

"You must go back," she said. "You must go back to the city and beat it—*somewhat*. It does n't matter much what that 'somewhat' is, Ed. Team for a clothing house till you don't need to any more—anything, just so you can look around and say, 'Well, I could make a go of it if I wanted to.' That 's all. Then come back here where you *want* to make a go of it, and you will. But you 've got to be hard, Ed—hard as nails—perfectly ruthless. You know that now."

Her voice had been gathering strength, and when she came to the last there was a quality of bitterness in it, as though some ancient mortification fanned her words. The other turned half away and stood brooding over the valleys with a kind of wistful sullenness, like a rebellious meek Moses surveying the Forbidden Land.

"But you yourself—" he started, and then hesitated, checked by some native delicacy. She understood what had been in his throat.

"Yes, but I *am* myself, and I can stand it in myself. Strangely enough, I can't stand it in *you*. I can't explain." She faced him with an abrupt coolness, as much as to say, "I 'm afraid you are forgetting yourself." Then, having kissed the tribal rod, she forgot herself on her own. "If you only knew how starved I am here for some one who can talk about the spring fashions in weather—and wood-chuck houses—who can understand some of the things I say when I don't talk. There!" Her hand lifted with an impulsive gesture of finality, as though to set a period to this paragraph of license. "Let 's go down," she said.

In the early afternoon she drove him to the Gorham station. Winter had come back in the hour, throwing a blanket over the sky, stiffening all those soft and traitorous hills, and turning the road to a ribbon of ruts which gave the woman an excuse for vigilance and silence. At the station she slipped a roll of small bills into her companion's hand, and when he stammered:

"Oh, no, Miss Vail—I can't—I could n't think—" she stopped him with an impatient motion.

"Please don't talk about it," she said. "I owe you more than that. They 're all registered stock—the ponies, you know. Please!"

He leaned from a window as the train moved off, his face still working. He called to her:

"I 'll bring it back to you—sure—honestly."

A neighbor passed as she unblanketed the team, calling cheerfully:

"It don't seem possible 't was so spring-like this mornin', does it, Miss Vail?"

"It does n't indeed," she answered with a tight-lipped graciousness.

A letter came in the late spring. It was an exuberant scrawl, written late at night, as he informed her in the opening sentence. He had found a job at "the Crescent." He wrote with a tentative eagerness, as something she would be happy to know, that he had displaced an old German of thirteen years' standing by proving he



"*We are obliged. I don't know what we should have done!*"

could pick up a tune more quickly. "I've found you're right," he wrote.

She laid the note on the table and went out to the orchard. That rallied winter had hung on in an extraordinary fashion, and now, late as it was, the trees were still at the top of their bloom, the rows standing like drifted hedges under the blue of the moon.

"Thirteen years!" She winced at the sound of her words, spoken suddenly aloud. Then she made to trick herself by repeating: "Thirteen years. It must be a well-established place, then. It's queer I should never have heard of it. The

Crescent! I don't remember the name." She went into the house and mounted to the shed garret, where the old papers were stored against the next pantry-cleaning. She sat down among them, running through page after page of "Amusements" with a curious eagerness, holding the pages close under the candle's flame. At length she came upon it, tucked cheaply in a corner—"Crescent Burlesque." Around the whole ran an endless border in small type, "Girls, girls, girls." The insert announced the attraction, "40—The Baby Dolls—40," and promised the "Parisien Belles" for the following week.

She did not know quite what to make of it. She folded the papers and laid them back in piles, still reiterating to herself that she did not know quite what to make of it. But down in the library once more she let it all out, speaking to the empty fireplace, "After all, it does n't matter much what that 'somehow' is."

There was no further news of him until after the new year. She had so few letters nowadays that it scarcely paid to go down for the grist of produce journals and medicine circulars. Ben brought the letter into the library one evening upon his return from a Grange meeting in the village.

"Just happened to look in the box 's I was goin' down," he commented.

"I see. Yes," Miss Vail murmured. "Yes," she repeated sharply, for he continued to stand in the doorway, his hat revolving in his hands.

"Should n't be s'prised if it went putty low to-night," he speculated.

"Yes." She took the poker and stabbed viciously at the punk of the back log. Ben's cheerful garrulity suddenly discovered an aim.

"Folks down to the Grange was talkin' 'bout that young feller to-night." He nodded toward the letter on the table, then, at sight of the other's face, he clucked in his throat and mumbled hastily: "Beg pardon, ma'am. Is that all for to-night?"

"Thank you; that is all."

She sat for a time without touching the letter, her fingers clenched in her palms, her lips tight, her cheeks blotched with an unhealthy red.

"I wish you could see my new quarters," Ed wrote. "It don't seem possible. I have one window bigger than all the windows at home put together, I guess, looking right out over Central Park. There are times when it looks exactly like up-country from the west mowing. I 'm dying to get up there, and I 'm going to when I can get away."

She wondered if she had missed a letter. Certainly it was difficult for her to stretch the "Crescent Burlesque" over a studio apartment on the park. She discovered a

sudden warmth at this possibility of having missed a letter—letters, for all she knew. She read on. He had to do more things now than he had before. A little party in his rooms the night before; he wrote about it with a naïve enthusiasm. Halliday—he spoke of Halliday continually and without qualification, as though she must know Halliday familiarly. And some girls from the "Peaches."

"It 's all bosh," he wrote with the impatience of young enlightenment—"it 's all bosh about chorus girls being so low. These I know are just nice, jolly girls, not so different from the girls at home. But I don't go in very much on the wine business myself. You have to be hard in other ways than you said to get ahead down here." And then, as if realizing something of the complacency in that, he added, "Don't you?"

She took the lamp and ascended the narrow stairway and went from room to room, holding the light high to illuminate their frosty emptiness, their unspeaking tidiness, softened by an infinitesimal film of the kindly dust. She wandered without aim, shivering slightly. She came to her own room, and stood before the mirror, holding the light close. After a long moment she spoke aloud: "Why, I 'm old enough to be his—" and then with a gesture of naked rebellion—"his elder sister."

She blew out the light quickly and went to bed, inexpressibly shocked and humiliated.

Spring came again. Miss Vail rode a great deal, rode hard, so that the farms along the colored hill lanes talked about it. One noon she came home, climbing out of the valley on the breathing mare, to find a motor party from the Lebanon hotel resting on the edge of her property. She drew up and sat watching them from a distance. After a while she raised a hand to her cheek and found tears rolling down from her eyes.

A phonograph was churning in the car, and the younger ones of the party were dancing on the new grass. Miss Vail had never seen people dance in just that



"... You're making fun of me!"

way. There was a physical exuberance about it, a certain free-limbed extravagance, that made it seem more of an improvisation than a set figure. She watched it with a tightness in her throat, like a child when the parlor doors roll back on the Christmas-tree. And the music, too, affected her strangely. There was something in that sugared syncopation, that spirit of the commonplace gone drunk on syrup, that troubled her unaccountably, a half-remembered face seen in a crowd.

She lifted the reins and rode down upon the party. The dancers stopped to regard her curiously; a woman came forward.

"Won't you join us?" she invited. "There are lots of sandwiches left in the hamper."

"No, thank you very much. I wondered what that piece was—the one you were just playing."

The elderly woman lifted her hands in mock horror, as much as to say: "Dear, dear! That's all quite beyond *me*," and looked to one of the girls.

"Why, that's the 'Beethoven Bear,'" that young person informed her, openly amazed at the need. "Is n't it a corker, honest? It's not really a 'Bear,' though; it's a 'Walk.' Are you from Lebanon?"

"No,"—Miss Vail wheeled rather abruptly uphill,—"I'm from here." Then with a sudden conscience she turned her head to smile at the blank-faced youngster and call back, "Thank you ever so much."

Ben met her at the barn door and listened to her unusually crisp instructions as to the orchard fence with his mind obviously elsewhere. He shifted his feet and fingered his lips, and when she had come to an end, jerked something from his pocket with a spasm of resolution.

"I picked this out of the box Monday," he made his confession, "and I declare I clean forgot it. Hope it wa'n't important."

She took the letter without a word and went into the house. It was a note of four words: "Look for me Wednesday."

She had to make sure this was Wednesday by counting very deliberately the days since the cream went down to Gorham. Well, he could n't have come on the morning train, then, or he would have been here by this time.

There was certainly no need for her to "look" for him yet, but an overweening restlessness carried her from one perspective to another. Far down the valley road a vehicle in an envelop of dust ducked abruptly into Morrow's Lane, and only then did she realize, with a sharp intaking of breath, how absorbedly she had been watching it.

She shook herself out of this fidgety mood and sat down at the piano. She played precisely, austere, not being able to forget the glittering abandon of that "Beethoven Bear"; but when she had wandered to the "Pathetic," she had to leave off abruptly, shocked by the change which had come into the familiar work. Something had gone out of it; some dark, marauding hand had robbed its vitals. She sat staring at the piano. At five the mare was ready in the buggy. She drove to Gorham with a painstaking leisureliness. She must not reach the station more than a minute before the train; she must not have to wait. Here was what fifteen months had come down to—she must not have to wait.

He was not the first to jump from the train. That was a pink-cheeked grocery drummer. Nor was he the second nor the third. She stood by the buggy, perfectly casual and self-contained, till the last passenger had hurried across the platform. A voice, barking apparently very close to her ear, made her start. She turned and found Mr. Dunn, the postmaster, inquiring:

"Were you waiting for some one?" She felt her face smarting as though she had been found in the street insufficiently clothed.

"No," she said.

She drove back to the farm, as she had come, with a painstaking leisureliness. The supper-table was set for two, as she had directed, but she offered no explanation to either of her helpers. She was impatient with the weakness which led her to go through a pantomime of eating whenever the servant came into the room. It smacked of cringing, and she was not accustomed to the gesture.

She spoke suddenly, out of a silence which had lasted half a meal.

"Why did n't I think of it?" She laid her knife and fork on the table, and then took them up again sharply, as though they had been symbols of those five generations, snatched back from a horrible brink. She buttered a half-slice of bread and ate it methodically.

"After all," she said, "there is such a thing as—" She did not finish the sentence. The silver clattered on the table as though her fingers had lost their strength unexpectedly. Getting up, she walked swiftly through the kitchen, followed the path to the barn door, and called in:

"Ben! Ben! Have the ponies come down?"

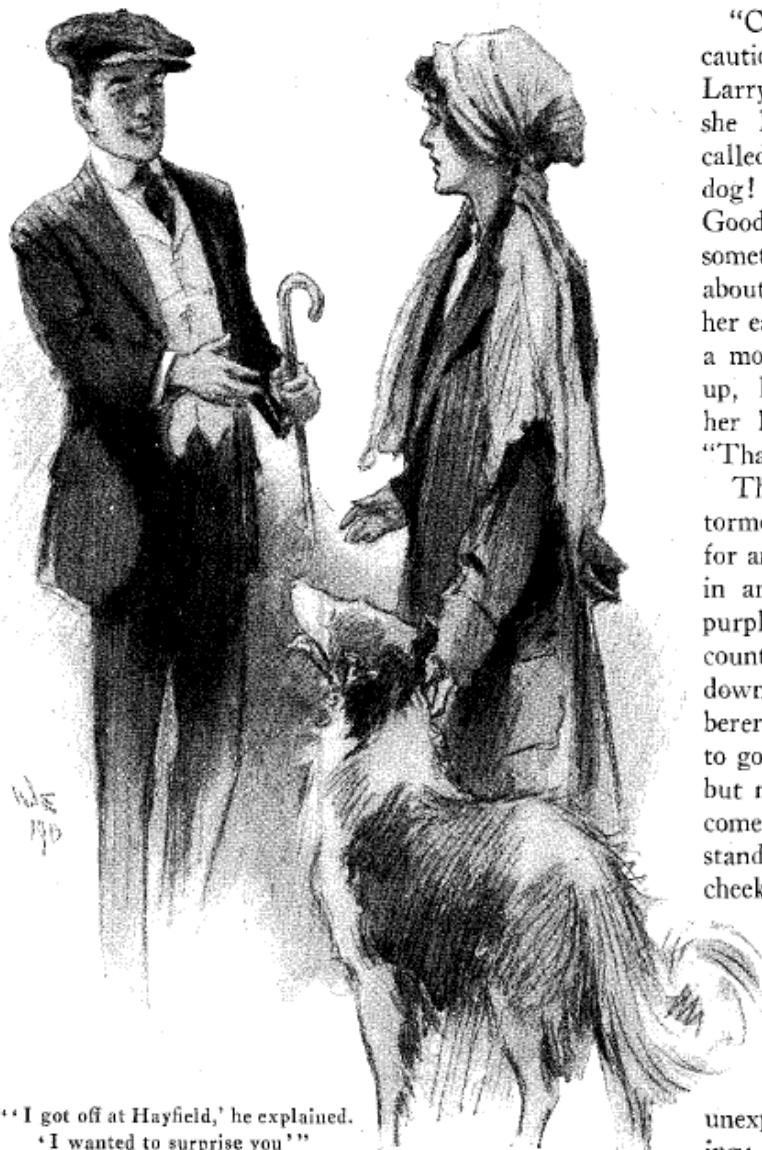
His face appeared from behind a forkful of hay, perspiring and apologetic.

"I was just about to go," he said.

"Never mind; I'll go myself. Here, Lady! Here, Larry! Good dogs!"

She could not keep herself from running. She motioned Larry Boy on.

"Go bring 'em to Missis!" And when the mother dog started, too, she called



"I got off at Hayfield," he explained.
"I wanted to surprise you."

her back shortly: "Let Larry Boy learn." Lady sank down on the grass, cowering, not at all understanding this business of long ago.

The north mowing stood up where the sun had set, a deep, sumptuous purple on a mat of flame. At the crest the budding elms reached out like estuaries of a somber ocean breaking a vivid shore. The silhouette of the racing dog showed for an instant on the ridge and was gone.

The woman waited, apparently listless. After a moment a faint clamor of barking crept over the ridge. The mother in the shadow half rose, the hair feathering along her spine.

"Careful!" the woman cautioned. "She must give Larry a chance." Then she lifted her voice and called: "Good dog—good dog! Bring 'em to Missis! Good dog!" There was something almost ritualistic about her actions. She bent her ear low to listen. After a moment she straightened up, laughed, and clapped her hands together softly. "That's right. Good dog!"

They came over the rise, tormenting the placid rim for an instant, poured down in an avalanche of deeper purple, and clattered by uncounted. A man came down behind them at a soberer pace. She had meant to go forward to meet him, but now that the time had come she found herself standing quite still, her cheeks warm and her eyes uncertain.

He cried, "Hullo!" He advanced with a hand stretched out. She accepted it with an unexpected composure, saying:

"It's awfully nice to see you again." She took furtive stock of him as they walked along, his bright cravat, not too radical, his well-pressed homespun, his traveling-cap of the same stuff, the Malacca stick with which he flicked the heads from last year's weed-stalks. She marked how his face had filled out and the set of the chin, which had found itself.

"I got off at Hayfield," he explained.
"I wanted to surprise you."

"That was nice."

"Thomas Doar is going to bring my things up."

"Oh." She had been wondering, but somehow had not cared to ask.

The conversation seemed to have run

itself out, and they walked on in silence, awkward on both sides. At the barn door she made an effort to throw off this numbness. "Here's Ed," she said. The words sounded a little screechy to her. The young man nodded abstractedly across the ponies.

"I'm hungry as the dickens," he commented to his companion. She smiled at a certain recollection.

"Come into the house and have a cup of coffee," she urged, repeating the exact words of another night, "and something to eat."

"You bet I will." He had failed to catch the allusion.

But she must play it out, undaunted by this slip of his. She must have the small table set in the library; she must sit and watch him eat; she must retire to spy upon him from the passageway. A sudden and unreasonable warmth came over her at sight of him looking up from his food to stare about the room, and she hurried back without remembering to slam the kitchen door.

"I did rather well with this room, don't you think?"

"I should say so!" He spoke with a good-humored enthusiasm. "You ought to see my place in the city, though—" He hesitated, realizing suddenly that he had said more than he had meant to say just at this time. He looked up to find her staring at nothing, her face perfectly placid except for a slight droop at the corners of her lips. "You know, I had to take a long lease on it," he explained, coloring. "Only way you can get them, you know."

"Ah—I see."

He grew still more pink and uncomfortable, regarding her from beneath his hand. He did not know quite what to make of this tone of hers. He retreated to the business of eating, making much of the details. In the end the silence was too much for him.

"You have n't told me," he broke out abruptly, "how you like my stuff."

"Your 'stuff'? I don't quite understand."

"My—why, the stuff I've been doing, you know."

"Oh, I see. But I do *not* know."

"Not know—" He appeared to be off his feet. "Why—why I supposed of course—"

"I may have missed a letter," she put in.

He fidgeted again, colored, and failed to meet her eyes. Then, with a show of enthusiasm, he jumped up and cried:

"Fine! Great! I can bring you the news in person, then." He stepped over to the piano, sat down with a preliminary flourish of his coat-tails and, as he had done upon another evening, began to wander through this and that, picking out haphazard phrases. He played better than he had before; that is, with fewer inaccuracies. He came back to a certain fragment from the "Overture to 1812," repeated it, then picked out the dominant thread with a deliberate finger.

"It's very easy," he said, wheeling to face his auditor, who had retreated to the depths of a window-seat. There was an assurance about his words that bordered upon glibness and smacked vaguely of the medicine-vender. "Others have done it, but none of them so well as I have." He wheeled to the keyboard again. "Listen!"

She listened while he took that fragile souvenir and made something quite different out of it, distorting, embroidering, dragging it willy-nilly into a sort of ragged lilt. It ended with more or less of a crash, a thoroughly democratic composition, in that it could not conceivably have been played wrongly.

"There!" He faced her expectantly, his hands clamped on his knees.

"It is very pretty," she said. Words had become easy for her once more. "What do you call it?"

"That? That's the 'Chick, Chick, Tschaikowsky!' Halliday is sure it will be a mint when it gets going. I'll show you the one I broke through with. Want to hear?"

"Never mind. Please don't bother. I think I've heard it—the 'Beethoven Bear,' is n't it?"



"He began to wander through this and that, picking out haphazard phrases"

"There, I thought you said you did n't know! The way that thing caught on! And just to think of it,—" he smiled at the recollection, staring down at the piano,—"a year and a half ago, when I was here, I thought it was pronounced 'Beeth-oven.' That 's why I did n't understand you. Does n't seem possible—only a year and a half."

Miss Vail spoke in the level tone of exquisite breeding.

"No, it does n't seem possible. Only a year and a half ago!" She got up and moved about the room, arranging small objects here and there. "Are you quite

satisfied now?" she asked at length. Not one of those five generations could have picked a flaw in the tone of her question. The other stuck his hands deep into his pockets and frowned. She had happened upon something of importance.

"No," he said. "Frankly, I 'm not. I have a suspicion Halliday is gouging me, from things I 've heard. I 'm going to try another publisher for my next."

"Ah, I should." Miss Vail found a book out of place on the shelf, inserted it where it should have been, and murmured: "You must be tired." Involuntarily her eyes went to that front window

where the boy had stood and struggled with his embarrassment. "I 'll run up and see that everything is straight."

When she had returned and he had gone up with the candle, she sat down on the settee before the empty fireplace. She remained there all night, dozing off at intervals. And there he discovered her in the early morning, surprising one of those lapses of slumber.

"Naughty girl!" he expostulated, hugely amused. "Forgetting to go to bed at night!"

After breakfast he called enthusiastically for overalls. He would go out and help with the "little horses"; he had been looking forward to this for ever so long. He plunged into the work with a blithe exuberance; but after a while he was back in the house again, wandering from room to room.

"You have n't such a thing as a paper, have you?" he asked, when his peregrinations had brought him to her in the library.

"I 'm sorry," she said; "I 'm afraid we have n't."

It was nearly eleven when he appeared in his homespun, twirling his stick uneasily. "I believe I 'll stroll down to the village and get a paper," he announced, "and see about my things. I don't know

what 's happened to Doar. He should have brought them last night."

"I 'll have the mare put in the buggy," she offered, without color or fervor, being quite sure it would be refused.

"Oh, no, no; don't bother. I 'd rather get the exercise." He waved it all off with an exaggerated unconcern, getting himself half out of the front door.

"Very well."

"Oh, by the way,"—he turned back, fumbling in a pocket,—"before I forget it. Thirty-nine dollars it was. Here, I think that 's right."

"Thank you."

She stood there, leaning slightly against the door-jamb, watching him go away, winding down the face of the front hill, ducking into the maple clump, reappearing, diminishing, vanishing. After a long time she allowed her eyes to fall to her hand and the wad of bills lying on the open palm. Five generations ago this woman would have needed that wad of bills, and would have thrown them into the fire. In this generation she did not need them, and she carried them back into the library and put them into her purse with a mechanical care. Then she went out into the kitchen and spoke to Ben's wife.

"Lunch for one only," she said. "Mr. Perkins has been called back to the city."